

Social Networking in Cyberschooling: Helping to Make Online Learning Less Isolating

By Michael Barbour and Cory Plough

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Online learning at the K-12 level has been growing dramatically over the past decade in the United States and worldwide. Proceeding on a similar trajectory, the use of charter schools as a means to provide education choice in the United States has also grown. These two paths have converged in many instances to form online or virtual charter schools, often referred to as cyber charter schools or simply cyber schools. Students enrolled in most supplemental online learning programs remain in their brick-and-mortar school and are able to maintain personal and social connections with most of their teacher and fellow students. However, cyber charter schools often serve students on a full-time basis and, as a result, these students do not have the ability to interact with their teachers and classmates before and after class or in the hallways of the school. Overcoming this perceived sense of social isolation for full-time online learning programs is a major challenge that many cyber charter schools struggle with.

In this article, we discuss one online school's attempt to address the social aspect of their students' experience by using social networking. We begin by describing the growth trends in cyber charter schools in the United States, followed by a brief description of Odyssey Charter High School (OCHS). We then trace the development of social networking at OCHS from initial attempts using a popular existing social network to the development of a closed virtual space. In our description of this development, we discuss

some of the academic uses of the social network by teachers and students. Finally, we examine the use of this social network as a way to provide the out-of-class interaction that online students often do without.

Trends in Cyber Charter Schools

In the first national overview of K-12 online learning in the United States, Clark (2000) made no mention of online charter schools. In his follow-up report, Clark (2001) identified virtual charter schools as one of the seven types of K-12 online learning programs and profiled one Kansas-based program. In their original *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning* report, Watson, Winograd, and Kalmon (2004) used the term cyber charter schools to describe one of their five types of K-12 online learning programs. In this report the authors profiled eleven states, eight of which were said to have cyber charter schools. Their first report, which included all 50 states, Watson and Kalmon (2005) indicated that there were 16 states that had cyber charter schools. In the most recent report, Watson, Gemin, and Ryan (2008) reported that there were now 21 states that had significant full-time online learning programs and that the full-time programs were “often charter schools” (p. 6).

Beyond these national surveys, Huerta and González (2004) estimated that over the five years preceding their study there had been approximately 60 cyber charter schools in 15 states serving over 16,000 students. Rotherham (2006) reported that there were 147 cyber charter schools in 18 states serving 65,354 students (or 4% of the total charter school population). Tucker (2007) found that there were 173 virtual charter schools serving 92,235 students in 18 states. The most recent figures for the total number of students involved in K-12 online learning indicate that there are about 700,000 who are taking one or more courses online (Picciano & Seaman, 2007). Based

on data from the survey conducted by Watson et al. (2008), approximately one fifth of enrollments were from the full-time (i.e., often charter school) programs in their sample. The authors also indicate that almost all of the elementary grade enrollments in K-12 online learning are from these full-time programs.

Clark and Berge (2005) listed expanding educational access and educational choice as two of the benefits of K-12 online learning. In describing these benefits, the authors stated that opportunities provided by programs such as cyber charter schools had the ability to reach out to “remedial and alternative learners and other targeted populations” (p. 12). Rapp, Eckes, and Plurker (2006) also spoke to the ability of cyber charter schools to provide opportunities to students who might otherwise drop out of traditional schools. These students drop out for a variety of reasons including teen pregnancy, working full-time to help support family, inability to assimilate socially, special education needs not being met, and a lack of belief in the relevance of education to their own lives. This population comprises the majority of students who are enrolled in Odyssey Charter High School.

Odyssey Charter High School (OCHS)

Odyssey Charter School (OCS), based in Las Vegas, NV, began in 1999 as a sponsored online charter school of the Clark County School District. It encompasses an elementary school and a high school. According to Watson et al. (2008), from Summer 2007 to Summer 2008 OCS was responsible for 1,405 full-time enrollments (all of their students were enrolled full-time), divided approximately evenly between the elementary school and the high school (OCHS).

OCHS used a blended learning model, with students physically attending the school one day a week for four hours (i.e., usually one morning or one afternoon) for a face-to-face course; the remainder of their courses were taught online. The same 10 to 20 students spent four hours in one room with teachers who circulated from group to group. For two hours of this face-to-face time, students completed a core values course offered in a traditional, direct-instruction approach. The remaining two hours students met with their mentor teachers to organize their coursework, check their progress, and address their academic needs.

The faculty work on campus full-time and, in addition to their online teaching course loads, mentored approximately ninety students. Teachers met their students by seeking them out during the four hours the students were physically present in the school. However, some teachers simply were not able to interact with all of their students

during this face-to-face time. This limitation, and the fact that students often only interacted with the 10 to 20 students with whom they physically attended school each week, prompted OCHS to begin experimenting with social networking to increase the interaction between teachers and students and, especially, among students themselves.

Odyssey of the Mind Social Network

The evolution of social networking at OCHS began mainly with the frustrations of two teachers and the limited interaction, particularly social interaction, between themselves and their students. Their efforts led to initial experimentation with Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) and, eventually, Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>) (see boyd and Ellison [2007] for a general description and history of social network sites).

Early Attempts at Social Networking. In the 2006-07 school year, a teacher at OCHS established a private, or closed, Facebook group for each online course and invited students to voluntarily join. The purpose was to meet students where they were hanging out online (Lenhart & Madden, 2007), and the teacher found that there some very good discussions occurred in those groups. However, there were several challenges, such as the lack of incentives for the students to join the groups and, even after students did join, Facebook limited interaction to discussions and wall comments within the group page. Ultimately, safety concerns were the main issue with students using Facebook groups (see Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini (2007) for an overview of these issues). While the teacher’s groups were set to private and only OCHS students could access them, students still had public profile pages in which they controlled the security settings. Like many teenagers and young adults the OCHS students chose to make their profiles widely available (Stutzman, 2006), which allowed anyone to communicate with them.

Odyssey of the Mind Pilot Project. The Ning platform allowed several OCHS teachers to create their own networks during the 2007-08 school year. These networks provided students all of the functions of other social networks (e.g., picture and music uploads, group formations, discussion forums, blogging, and profile sharing). In addition, it enabled teachers to control access to their networks. One of those

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networks was Odyssey of the Mind; 60 students from one teacher's online courses joined during the first semester. While a positive experience, there was not the level of activity the teacher desired, so during the second semester he extended the network to include six other teachers and their students (a total of 200 students at the end of the pilot stage).

Unlike the Facebook groups, the Ning provided a "walled garden"—meaning that no one could join the network who was not invited. Since no one outside of the school could communicate with the students inside the walled garden, parents were also more comfortable with the idea of allowing their children to join. The pilot project included seven teachers who used it for curriculum-based activities. The students collaborated, discussed, reviewed ideas, and socialized in what they described as a less stressful environment. The social network was a more relaxed environment to interact with teachers, as it was a space where the students were already spending significant social time. This was consistent with Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007), who found that students appreciated their teachers' efforts to use a social networking site in their own research.

The social network allowed the students to participate in planning classes. They were given the opportunity to let the teacher know which sports they would like to play in gym class. They were also able to tutor each other in groups they created. These groups operated much like learning communities, where "like-minded groups of people [gather] together in the spirit of shared goals" (Conrad, 2002, p. 4). These students' shared goal was an understanding of the course material. Barbour (2007) found that online students often sought help from their student colleagues before seeking help from their teachers or other sources in much the same way as occurred in the Odyssey of the Mind. Another teacher had students collaborating on their final project within a Ning group created just for their class. These students reviewed peers' ideas and offered suggestions on each other's work. An exam-

ple of a co-curricular activity that the Ning allowed was for students from different classes to become involved in a global "Save Darfur" student campaign, a joint or cross-course project in which several of classes took part. The social network site was crucial to the success of this project, as course management systems do not allow students registered in different courses to communicate with each other.

At the conclusion of the pilot stage, the teacher who was primarily responsible for the Odyssey of the Mind social network created a video in which students discussed the ben-

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efits, as they perceived them, to the social network. This video is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnWxUtveG8s>.

As the video describes, students addressed their appreciation for having a school-supported social network since they had very few other ways to meet kids at OCHS. They also discussed how using Web 2.0 tools and the social network helped engage them and provide opportunities to collaborate on the web.

OCHS' Odyssey of the Mind Social Network. Beginning with the 2008-09 school year, the Odyssey of the Mind Ning network was opened to all 750 OCHS students and 27 staff. At the end of the first quarter 321

students and approximately a dozen teachers were involved, with student recruitment on-going. Administration of the Ning network continues under the original teacher and assistant principal who began the social network experiment two years earlier. Monitoring content became important and a program was developed to search for inappropriate language and music. The six most active students took part in this process by monitoring blogs and discussion groups.

Both teachers and students have continued to use the social network as a curricular tool. For example, in the Principles of Leadership course students designed their own homepage within the social network as an "About Me" project that could act as information for the network as well as the course. The OCHS learning management system was limiting because there was no easy way for students to meet each other or work with students outside of their individual course. As an example of this intra-course communication, one algebra class created an area that offered assistance to other students. Karabenick and Knapp (1991) found students are reluctant to seek assistance if they feel it will affect their social standing among their peers. As the social network was a place where students could interact and seek the academic assistance they needed without having to physically face their colleagues, this may have served to increase the frequency of this kind of activity (along with the number of students who participated).

The social network also became a place that motivated students by allowing them to become more connected to the school and the school community. As a hybrid program that had only a small percentage of face-to-face time for teachers and students, communication between the school and students was typically very formal. Teachers would send e-mail messages and make telephone calls to students' homes that primarily focused on a student's lack of academic progress. As a result of the typical interactions, there was often little opportunity for students to get to know the teachers or each other on multiple levels, much like they would

be able to in a traditional high school. The social network provided a casual environment that assisted students in building stronger personal relationships with their teachers (ones that participated in Odyssey of the Mind) by allowing them to get to know each other better outside of the formal academic setting (Hewitt & Forte, 2006). By getting to better know their teachers, and many more of their fellow classmates, students' connection to the school and their studies increased, creating an increase in their own motivation (Cayanus, 2004).

Beyond the curricular aspects, one of the most interesting developments during the 2008-09 year was the increase in social interactions that took place within the social network. By the end of the first semester 119 groups were created—most of which were created by the students themselves with only 12 created by teachers. Students formed common interest groups, including theater and literature lovers, web design creators, mixed martial arts fanatics, comic book collectors, and enthusiasts of anime, teen documentary, and film and acting. Along with the groups, there were numerous forum discussions on non-academic topics that are important to the development of young adults (Fraser, 1992). One of the most active forms of interaction has come from the student-led discussions about teen problems. At the time information was collected for this article, 66 forum discussions were active with approximately 25% of them focusing on teen problems, ethical dilemmas, and social issues. In his account of the stages of human development, Erikson (1958, 1968, 1982) described adolescence as a stage where humans must achieve their identity, as opposed to identity diffusion. For example, in the social network there were discussions about depression, boyfriend/girlfriend problems, parent issues, interracial relationships, religion, and life after death. All of these topics are included in the kinds of conflicts that adolescents must come to terms with to develop their own identity. Essentially, the social network has been the public space that has allowed the students a sphere for their social de-

velopment (boyd, 2007), similar to the kind of public space they would have experienced in the traditional school environment (often outside of the formal classroom).

Conclusion

There were three main goals for Odyssey of the Mind. The first was to create an environment where students could collaborate online without interference from outside influences. The second was to address social isolation by providing a space for students to discuss their personal and

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academic experiences with peers. The third was to employ dynamic technologies that students were utilizing outside of school as a way to motivate them towards school.

The initial pilot program demonstrated that regardless of the nature of the population of students, OCHS students wanted to interact with their peers in both academic and social ways. It also provided evidence that students could benefit academically from real-time connections with a broader group of students (beyond those they would interact with during their four hours of face-to-face time at the school). The teachers at OCHS also saw students engaging in social ways they had not envisioned or experienced before in the OCHS environment, such as sharing personal histo-

ries, discussing controversial issues in an open and mature way, and generally doing the kinds of things you'd expect teenagers to do in a traditional high school environment (e.g., trying to organize a prom).

The primary concern with the social network experiment was student safety. By using the “walled garden” offered by the Ning environment, teachers were able to take responsibility for the content of the network as well as the people with whom the students were able to interact. Security measures, such as requiring students to use their school email, having parents sign a permission form, and matching the names of the network applicants to a master student list, prevented access beyond the OCHS community. The use of both staff and students to monitor the appropriateness of music, language, and pictures was also important. Finally, while there were some instances of students harassing each other, this kind of behavior was minimal and often offered teachable moments to educate students on being good digital citizens.

Simonson (1999) proposed a theory of equivalency when it came to the delivery of education at a distance. “Distance education’s appropriate application should provide equivalent learning experiences for all students—distant and local—in order for there to be expectations of equivalent outcomes of the educational experience” (p. 7). Essentially, distance educators—such as those at Odyssey Charter High School—should not strive to provide the *same* experience as a student would receive from a brick-and-mortar education, but to provide students with a *similar* experience. Through the use of the “Odyssey of the Mind” social network the students at this cyber school are able to receive a social experience that may not be the same as the one they would receive in a traditional school, but appears to be an equivalent experience.

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